

Couples HIV Counseling and Testing

Module One: Background and Discordance

Module One will introduce the goals of this training and explain the importance of the couples HIV counseling and testing (CHCT) model. In addition to talking about expectations for the training as a whole, participants will also discuss the following Module One topics:

- Goals of couples HIV counseling and testing
- Goals for this training course
- Comparison of CHCT with other HIV testing models
- The concept of discordance

This module will also include some get-to-know-you activities and a Pre-Course Knowledge Assessment.

Notes:

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HIV Couples Counseling and Testing: Facilitating a Shared Vision

- In many parts of the world, people speak their own regional language and one other widely shared language.
- Couples counseling is a variation of this. In couples counseling there are four views: those of each partner, the couple together, and the counselor.
- In HIV couples counseling and testing, the goal is to bring together these views and to create a shared vision and a shared language.
- This shared vision is the couple's acceptance of the realities of HIV in their lives, being empowered to prevent acquiring and transmitting HIV, and sharing their support and compassion for each other.

Over the next few days, we will cover many aspects of counseling couples. Our goal is that you understand all the aspects of couples HIV counseling and testing. We'll begin with the importance of couples counseling and discuss the skills you will need to counsel couples and the unique characteristics of counseling couples in different life stages.

Goal of the Training Course

The goal of this course is to train people who provide HIV counseling and testing services to individuals on how to conduct an HIV prevention counseling session with couples by following the Couples HIV Counseling and Testing (CHCT) Protocol.

Objectives for the Training Course

By the end of this course, the participants will understand the following concepts and develop counseling skills in their application:

- Importance of couples HIV counseling and testing
- Counseling skills required to work effectively with couples
- Unique HIV counseling and testing issues of couples at different life stages
- Components of CHCT Protocol
- Effectively communicating the concept of HIV sero-discordance to couples
- Multiple approaches to recruit and conduct outreach to couples
- Appropriate support services for couples

In order to help everyone meet their goals and objectives for the training, we will set some ground rules that will help the training run smoothly and keep discussions open and comfortable.

Ground Rules	
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Parking Lot. If you have questions or concerns during the training that you would like to address, please express them to the trainer. If they would be best addressed at a later time, the trainer may put them in the “Parking Lot,” or write them down to be sure that they are dealt with later.

Couples HIV Counseling and Testing: Characteristics and Advantages

Models of HIV Counseling and Testing (HCT) Services

- Client-initiated testing and counseling (CITC)
 - At stand-alone or mobile voluntary counseling and testing centers (VCT)
 - In the workplace
 - Services for individuals
 - Services for youth
 - Services for vulnerable populations
 - HCT for families
 - Couples HIV counseling and testing (CHCT)
- Provider-initiated testing and counseling (PITC)
 - For all persons seeking in-patient and out-patient services in a health facility
 - HIV diagnosis for tuberculosis (TB) clinic patients
 - Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) for antenatal clinic, post-natal ward, and labor and delivery ward clients (including couples)
 - HCT for persons attending sexually transmitted infection (STI) clinics
 - For individuals, couples, or families in the home-based setting

Countries need a strategic mix of models to reach the greatest number of people and to assure that those who are HIV-positive get appropriate interventions for care and treatment. These different models may have different purposes and objectives, messages, emphases, target populations, and protocols. The models will require different skills and training requirements.

The focus of this training is couples HIV counseling and testing (CHCT). Couples counseling and testing can be delivered in different sites and within different models of existing counseling and testing services, such as VCT centers and during PMTCT sessions, among others. What makes couples counseling and testing different is that two people in a relationship come for services together. They are counseled together and receive their test results together.

Advantages of Couples HIV Counseling and Testing

1. Environment is safe for couple to discuss risk concerns.
2. Partners hear information and messages together, enhancing likelihood of a shared understanding.
3. Counselor has the opportunity to ease tension and diffuse blame.
4. Counseling messages are based on the results of both individuals.
5. Individual is not burdened with the need to disclose results and persuade partner to be tested.
6. Counseling facilitates the communication and cooperation required for risk reduction.
7. Treatment and care decisions can be made together.
8. Couple can engage in decision-making for the future.

Notes:

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Importance of Couples HIV Counseling and Testing

- The couple is a collective unit representing more than two individuals (“our family” or “our life”).
- HIV/AIDS is a disease of the family, the community, and society.
- The couple is the backbone of the community.
- To contend with HIV and plan for their future, both partners must know their status.
- Couples HIV services enhance opportunities to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.
- In countries with high HIV prevalence, it is fairly common for one partner to be HIV infected and the other uninfected—meaning that they are HIV sero-discordant, or simply “discordant.”
- Many individuals and couples have the misconception that discordance is not possible.
- Couples can remain discordant for a long time—even more than 10 years.
- Individual testing leads to assumptions about partner’s HIV status.
- Individual rates of disclosure are very low.
- Before knowing their HIV status, most discordant couples do not use condoms; however, CHCT has been shown to increase condom use.
- In many cases, the couple enters the relationship when they are already discordant—discordance is NOT a sure sign of infidelity.
- Discordant couples are not protected by just remaining faithful; protective measures must be taken to maintain the discordant results.

Discussing Discordance with Couples

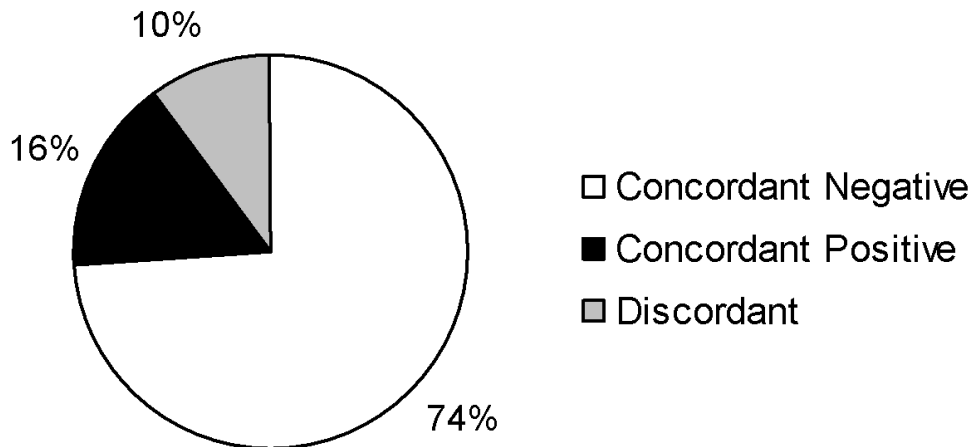
It is important to understand the different types of HIV test results that are possible during a couples counseling session.

Sero-Discordance

- A concordant couple is one where both partners have the same HIV status—they are both negative or both positive.
- A discordant couple has one HIV-positive partner and one HIV-negative partner.
- Discordance is common in countries with high prevalence of HIV.

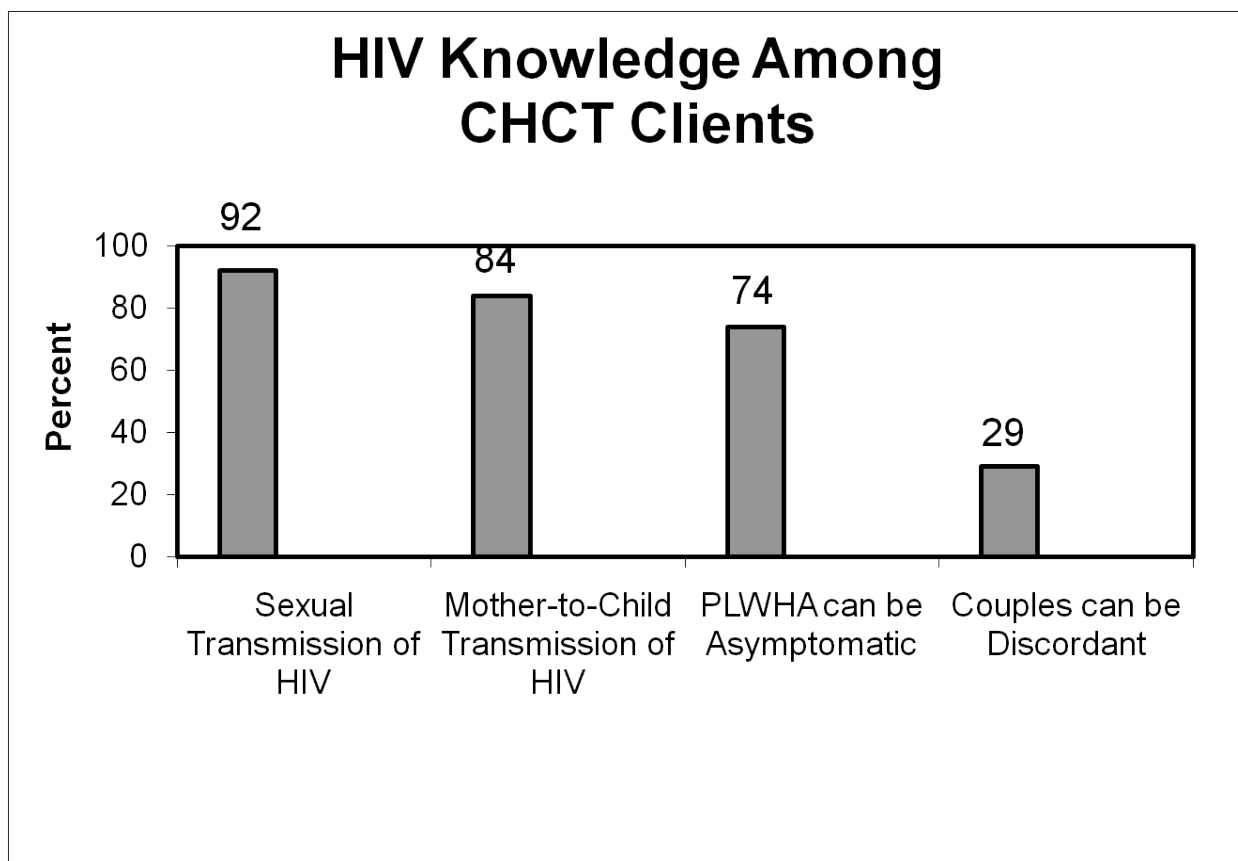
The percentages of couples who are concordant negative, concordant positive, and discordant will vary by the prevalence of HIV in the country, within communities in a country, and by service settings within communities, such as those in urban or rural settings, PMTCT settings, VCT centers, and TB clinics, among others. Communities with high HIV prevalence rates have higher rates of concordant positive and discordant couples.

Proportion of Discordant and Concordant Couples



(Reference: Roth 2001)

People's understanding of how HIV is transmitted varies. The chart below shows what percentage of people understand each fact about HIV or HIV transmission.



In CHCT it will be very important for you to emphasize and explain areas that are not widely understood, such as couple discordance. The HIV-negative partners in discordant couples are at very high risk for getting HIV if the couple does not take steps to protect the HIV-negative partner. *We will talk more about discordance in Module Six when we review that section of the CHCT intervention.*

Many people do not understand the facts about discordance. Many myths about discordance exist that need to be corrected. The following are some of the most common myths about discordance:

- Many people believe discordance is not possible.
- When tested individually, many people assume that their partner's HIV status is the same as their own.
- Many people believe discordance is a sure sign of infidelity.

It is important that counselors make sure that discordant couples understand the facts about discordance:

Facts about Discordance

- The negative partner in a discordant couple is not protected only by remaining faithful. Couples need to take precautions such as using condoms to prevent transmission from the infected partner to the negative partner.
- When couples are discordant, infection could have occurred in different ways:
 - The positive partner may have been infected before they became a couple.
 - The positive partner may have other partners outside the relationship or may have acquired HIV non-sexually.
- Transmission risk through sex is extremely high among steady discordant couples who do not take preventive measures such as using condoms.

Again, transmission risk is extremely high in steady discordant relationships. CHCT helps reduce transmission among discordant couples by helping couples adopt risk-reduction behaviors, increase condom use, and reduce mother-to-child transmission.

Consider the following study, which gives an idea of the impact you can have with partners in a discordant relationship by counseling them to change risk behaviors:

Imagine 100 HIV-negative partners in discordant couples.

Within 1 year, an average of 22 of these 100 HIV-negative partners will become infected unless they change their risk behaviors. This rate of transmission is higher than the transmission rates of TB or malaria.

However, in this study of couple counseling, the majority of discordant couples changed their behavior and only 6 of 100 became infected within 1 year, suggesting that 16 infections were prevented. (Reference: Allen 1992)

Wrap-Up: Importance of CHCT

The following factors demonstrate why CHCT is such a valuable process for couples:

- Partners in a couple undergo counseling and testing together and learn the test results together.
- Partners hear prevention messages together and are guided by the counselor to think through both their HIV test results and to plan ways for ensuring a healthy future.
- Before knowing their HIV status, many discordant couples do not use condoms. However, CHCT has been shown to increase condom use.

CHCT is equally beneficial for concordant positive and concordant negative couples.

Concordant negative couples can take steps to protect their relationship from HIV, such as by being faithful to each other. Concordant positive partners can be supportive of each other and make decisions together regarding their HIV care and treatment and their future.